DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 002 CE 055 046

TITLE	NVQs and Learners with Special Needs. National Vocational Qualifications Number 3.
INSTITUTION	Further Education Unit, London (England).
REPORT NO	ISBN-1-85338-189-6
PUB DATE	Mar 90
NOTE	7p.; For a related document, see ED 305 454.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Access to Education; Adults; Career Exploration; Credits; *Employment Qualifications; Government School Relationship; Individualized Instruction; Job Training; Labor Force Development; Postsecondary Education; *Prevocational Education; *Prior Learning; *Special Needs Students; Standards; Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS	*Great Britain; *National Vocational Qualifications (England)

ABSTRACT

A project of Great Britain's Further Education Unit explored the role adult education colleges can play in facilitating access to the national vocational qualifications (NVQs) for learners with special needs and identifying barriers to NVQs for adults with special needs. The issues surrounding the current and planned changes to the NVQs are that: (1) people with disabilities have the most problems in accessing vocational training in a country where less than half the population obtain a vocational qualification; (2) predicted demographic changes will mean that people with special needs will be needed in the work force; (3) lecturers and trainers need to shift their thinking about the capacities and futures of people with disabilities; and (4) NVQ awards should be free of any barriers that restrict access to them. Five colleges were visited and staff from nine colleges attended a seminar to discuss the issues. Among the findings reported were that: (1) few colleges were providing NVQs for learners with special needs; (2) training toward NVQs was not generally seen as a primary method of employment preparation; (3) in some colleges, special needs staff were ignorant of NVQs and their role in helping learners gain employment; (4) most schools put special needs adults into existing slots rather than providing tailored programs; and (5) prevocational education and career exploration opportunities were seldom offered. Among the project's recommendations were that adults should receive NVQ credits for prior learning and credits for basic skills should count toward NVQs. (CML)

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NUMBER 3

NVQs and LEARNERS with SPECIAL NEEDS

NATIONAL VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of bulletins which aims to explain the implications of current and planned changes to vocational qualifications. In this bulletin the issues surrounding NVQs and learners with special needs are explored. It describes the activities and findings of a short project (RP554) undertaken for FEU by the Rathbone Society, supported by Elizabeth McEvoy from Remploy. The project's findings form the basis of a more extensive piece of work, funded by the Training Agency, that began in January 1990. Copies of the full report of the project are available on request from FEU Information Centre.

THE ISSUES

- Less than half the population obtain a vocational qualification, and people with learning difficulties or physical or sensory disabilities experience the most problems in accessing vocational training.
- Demographic changes will require employers to look towards people with special needs to become part of their workforce.
- Lecturers and trainers need to shift their thinking in relation to the capacities and futures of people with disabilities.
- NVQ awards should be free from any barriers which restrict access to them, and therefore NVQs offer possible access to a national framework of qualifications for people with disabilities. Work needs to be done to ensure that the potential is seized.

BACKGROUND

The new National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) framework has been specifically designed to provide a comprehensive system for the achievement of competence-based awards, with coherent progression routes available to all learners. These, in principle, should enhance access to nationally recognised vocational qualifications for all members of the community, including those with special learning needs.

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The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) has a clearly expressed commitment to ensuring that no overt or covert discriminatory practices regarding learners with special needs are built into the award or its assessment practice. NCVQ requires that there should be no restriction to awards in the form of education or training required, time taken to gain an award, or upper or lower age limits. Assessment of competence is extremely flexible since it permits any valid method of assessment, provided it can demonstrate that competence has been achieved to the specified standard.

PROJECT AIMS

The project aimed to explore the role FE colleges can play in facilitating access to NVQs for learners with special needs who are or hope to be in open employment, as well as raising awareness of these issues within NCVQ, with employers, and within the FE system. It was particularly concerned with identifying barriers restricting access to NVQs and highlighting interesting practices in the preparation of learners with special needs for NVQs. The project team also made a number of recommendations for further development initiatives in this area.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Visits to five colleges were arranged to obtain first-hand information about the provision for learners with special needs to have access to NVQs. Following these visits, a group of staff from nine colleges, including those visited, were invited to attend a seminar organised by FEU where the issues that emerged from the visits were discussed.

Other activities were also taken into account, including:

- the Training Agency/Remploy project, 'Access to Nationally Recognised Vocational Qualifications for Trainees with Special Needs in Scotland';
- the three Local Quality Initiatives (LQIs) funded by the Training Agency at Cambridge, Airedale and Wharfedale, and Swinton Colleges of Further Education;
- the NCVQ/Remploy project on 'Access to Vocational Qualifications for Trainees with Special Needs'.

Relevant documents used to set the context were:

- the White Paper on *Employment for the 1990s;*
- the HMI survey, *Education Observed No. 9: Students with Special Needs in Further Education;*
- various policy statements by NCVQ, the Training Agency and awarding bodies.

[illegible]

Economic and social factors, as well as the requirement to maximise individual potentials of learners with special needs, ensures that preparation for employment is a chief aim of colleges. In general, the provision and support for learners with special needs in the colleges visited reflected the aims of the colleges for these students. Where the institution saw the preparation of learners for employment as a major aim, the majority of learners shared that aim.

Few LEA colleges contacted during the project were providing NVQs for learners with special needs, and training toward NVQs was not generally seen as a primary method of employment preparation. In some colleges, the first barrier to learners with special needs was special needs staff ignorance of NVQs and their role in aiding learners to gain employment. Colleges involved with the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) and Employment Training (ET) were more aware of the existence and potential of NVQs and their relevance to the futures of learners with disabilities.

MARKETING NVQs

The project highlighted the need for more effective marketing of NVQs to teachers and learners with special needs as well as to their potential employers. There is a clear need to raise awareness among special needs teams that NVQs are an option for their students. Similarly, mainstream staff must be made more aware of the abilities of learners with special needs in order that curricular integration may be more effectively achieved.

The role of special needs teams should be re-examined. Is their primary function to give guidance and support to learners on mainstream courses which offer pre-vocational qualifications to those who need them, or to offer NVQs for learners in specially designed provision? There is a clear need for a whole-college policy on the accessing of NVQs by learners with special needs, and for the continuous internal marketing of special needs work.

Within the broader framework of college policy, the research team found colleges paid little attention to the need to attract learners with special needs. Four of the colleges visited did not appear to have any arrangements to monitor admission practices to ensure that they were non-discriminatory. These findings support those of the earlier FEU research project RP442, 'Marketing Special Educational Needs'. Until learners with special needs take their place alongside their peers in FE colleges, access to vocational qualifications will remain closed for many of them. The effective design and delivery of individual learning programmes within a flexible, structured framework of support are essential in providing access to NVQs for people with disabilities.

SUPPORT FOR CLIENTS' NEEDS

Flexibility and responsiveness are essential elements in the support required by learners with special needs to gain access

to NVQs. The research team found that, in most instances, learners were slotted into existing courses rather than having individually tailored programmes. Skill tasting and pre-vocational experience were available only in certain occupational areas, so learners interested in other areas would have to seek alternative provision. Colleges felt, however, that there was sufficient variety and flexibility within these courses to meet the needs of learners.

Only at one college was the curriculum designed to help learners to choose freely. Here the special needs team saw themselves as facilitators to advance learners' wishes, the main options being into regular college provision. Learners with special needs worked towards vocational qualifications alongside other learners, with extra support where necessary from the tutor and special needs team.

The introduction of NVQs gives colleges an opportunity to revise their expectations of students with special needs and to replace their traditional courses with more flexible, individualised programmes aimed at preparing learners for these new qualifications. Concepts of appropriate support will have to change, with much greater emphasis being placed on technological aids to learning, and a wider range of teaching and learning opportunities being offered by staff who are not special needs 'specialists'. There are considerable staff development implications here.

The team also found that there is little support from tutors when learning takes place outside the college. Indeed there is a scarcity of consistent externally provided support for many learners with special needs in FE. Specialist social workers, teachers of the hearing impaired, paramedical workers and educational psychologists are not routinely available to further education. It is essential that external support services should not fall away when young people leave school; their importance often increases during the vital transition to adulthood and employment.

INITIAL ASSESSMENT

In-depth assessment and continuous reviews thereafter are prerequisites for matching education and training to the needs and capabilities of any individual learner.

The research team found that the approach to initial assessment is not consistent at present, even though this is crucial to the devising of appropriate learning programmes.

Many learners are assessed prior to college by external agencies such as the Careers Service, schools, managing agencies (YTS), training agents (ET), initial training centres and LEA educational psychologists, with considerable variations in effectiveness and appropriateness of methods. There is little self-assessment. In many cases, agencies do not have any written standards for assessment.

Initial assessment procedures within colleges varied considerably, in some cases being undertaken by a lecturer who had no knowledge of special educational needs.

The practice of flexibility inherent in the design framework of NVQs should enable and require full assessment of individual needs to take place. It is essential that initial assessment includes the crediting of prior achievement against national standards. Several colleges observed that the adoption of a modular system of curriculum organisation, as in Scotland, would enable them to meet learners' needs more fully.

Colleges generally recognise the importance of communicating assessment information about the support needs and potential of the learner to all concerned with the learner. However, there is little evidence from this survey that information about learning needs moves from colleges to workplace providers, or from training managers when off-the-job training takes place in colleges. In effect, assessment, particularly of support needs, begins anew at each transition, with consequent loss of time and opportunity for the learner.

ACCREDITATION OF PRIOR LEARNING (APL)

A development which should lead to more effective individualised learning programmes is the Accreditation of Prior Learning. The Training Agency and NCVQ have recently funded a project piloting APL procedures in six FE colleges, where candidates are assessed against the national standards prescribed in NVQs and provide evidence of prior learning against these standards. Colleges might provide 'top-up' training to enable candidates to achieve the qualifications, and must be able to deliver flexibly and responsively. Project workers spoke to representatives of two of the colleges, neither of which had used APL procedures for candidates with special needs. This may be a reflection of the aspirations of learners and teachers.

PRE-VOCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL LEARNING

Distinctions between general, pre-vocational and vocational education are increasingly difficult to make. Much specially designed provision in colleges focuses on personal effectiveness and basic skills training, with an element of work preparation and experience. This might be termed 'pre-vocational' education.

The development of core skills can be seen as a crucial component of training programmes designed to provide occupational competence. However, as yet core skills do not help toward the accumulation of credits counted separately towards an NVQ, with the result that where learners do not have the opportunity to train towards work-specific occupational competences, they do not receive any credit for basic skills acquired. The LQI at Cambridge additionally found

that, in their first year of YTS, most trainees with special needs were vocationally uncommitted and not ready for occupationally focused training. Indeed, they required pre-vocational qualifications (termed 'contributory qualifications') so that achievements in the areas of personal effectiveness and basic skills could be recorded and certificated.

Both NCVQ and the Training Agency now recognise the importance of accrediting core skills and are working to produce 'generic' units of competence.

Given the confusion over definitions of what constitutes pre-vocational and vocational provision, it is understandable that statistical records of student entry for pre-vocational and vocational qualifications were difficult to obtain, as was information about the NVQs colleges were intending to offer. There is clearly a need for pre-vocational education; the problem lies in linking the experiences gained within it to the NVQ framework of accreditation.

NVQ STRUCTURE

A much reiterated complaint by those working with people with special needs is the lack of any skills accreditation before Level 1 for trainees who may not achieve an NVQ and for those who need a stepping-stone to Level 1. Such accreditation would prove highly motivating for those who are daunted by the need to achieve several units in order to obtain an award.

THE SCOTVEC EXPERIENCE

The Training Agency/Remploy project on the SCOTVEC National Certificate qualifications in Scotland found that the system in operation there, which certificates free-standing modules, offers much more flexibility than the NCVQ system requiring a number of units to be accumulated before a full award can be made. Learners can work towards as many modules in as many occupational or core areas as they wish.

NVQ STANDARDS

Although NCVQ has stated its commitment to open access to its awards, there is initial evidence from this survey that the introduction of NVQs has resulted in some qualifications becoming unattainable by learners with special needs, as the following examples demonstrate:

- Compulsory core modules in Agriculture now include a requirement concerning self-propelled power units, thus making it impossible for certain students to achieve sufficient units to gain a full certificate.
- Three of the 18 compulsory units in Level 2 of a Diploma in General Reception cannot be completed by students with visual impairment and who are physically unable to undertake certain units as they are presently specified.
- A reading age of 17 years was required to understand a multiple choice test on Catering. The job concerned was general kitchen assistant.
- An NVQ Level 1 in Clothing Skills had specified a speed standard which learners with certain disabilities could not achieve, although they were able to achieve standards relating to quality.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

These findings support those of the NCVQ/Remploy project, 'Access to Vocational Qualifications for Trainees with Special Needs', which found that where flexible delivery and assessment standards are in place and qualifications meet the NCVQ criteria, trainees with special needs can achieve NVQs or credits towards them. However, some conditionally accredited NVQs are still heavily knowledge based and frequently demand literacy levels above those required in the workplace. In addition, the traditional, course-based delivery of some NVQs make credit accumulation and the accreditation of prior learning difficult to achieve.

The researchers found that those working with learners with special needs felt some standards unnecessarily discriminatory against people with physical or sensory disabilities; others were felt to be too narrowly defined and task specific, at the expense of generic competence and skills. There is also evidence that the present range of NVQs is not sufficiently broad to cater for the needs of trainees with special needs.

There is some evidence from the employment of people with special needs and disabilities that they do effectively perform jobs in domains where NVQs exist, but cannot obtain an NVQ because of restrictions surrounding the award. This would seem to suggest that Lead Industry Bodies have not sufficiently considered the special needs of some employees in setting their standards. There is a need to continue to raise the awareness of Lead Industry Bodies and the Training Agency in the area of special educational and training needs. More managers in industry need the potential capabilities of people with disabilities drawn to their attention by, for example, more systematic contact and support from FE staff engaged in providing work experience placements for this group of learners.

WORKPLACE TRAINERS AND ASSESSORS AWARDS

Some colleges expressed considerable concern about the possible effects of extending the requirements of the Workplace Trainers and Assessors Award to providers of placements for learners with special needs. The main fear was that placements will simply dry up. However, under the present system, while placements are fairly freely available, learners on work experience are not usually accredited for any achievement of vocational competence at the employer's workplace. Special

needs tutors must address this issue to ensure that competences acquired during what are often lengthy work experience placements can be accredited towards an NVQ.

ASSESSMENT OF AWARDING BODIES

College experience of awarding bodies' variation in assessment of students with special needs is generally good. However, awarding bodies were criticised for adding an endorsement to certificates when alternative or varied arrangements for assessment were made. Such endorsements may lead employers to believe that applicants with special needs are incapable of doing the job and have acquired a 'second class' certificate. Such an endorsement rarely has relevance to the demands of the actual job.

The LQIs based at Airedale and Wharfedale College and at Swinton College found that assessment methods used for many vocational qualifications are biased towards the assessment of knowledge rather than occupational competence, and that trainees succeeded far more when assessments were work based.

ACTIVITIES BY OTHER ORGANISATIONS

NCVQ

NCVQ maintains regular contact with bodies with interests in the areas of equal opportunities and special needs. It has convened four short-life working groups on equal opportunities and NVQs, and has also funded a two-year project with Remploy which explores issues relating to access to vocational qualifications for trainees with special needs.

Its video, *Recognising Ability*, is aimed at raising awareness of the abilities of people with special needs, and how NVQs are accessible by all members of the community. Two information notes, *Assessment in National Vocational Qualifications* (November 1989) and *Assessment in National Vocational Qualfications: Use of Evidence from Prior Assessment* (January 1989), promote wider use of alternative assessment and accreditation of prior learning.

THE TRAINING AGENCY

The Training Agency has published a code of practice on special needs in YTS and its new guide for providers of YTS and ET, *Building on Ability – A Guide for Training People with Disabilities*, is now available. In its design frameworks for ET and YTS, the Training Agency requires trainers to be given an opportunity to work towards an NVQ where such a qualification exists. In addition to the project with Remploy which is now examining access to nationally recognised qualifications in Scotland, and the three LQIs, it has funded a project concerning three major awarding bodies and access to vocational qualifications for all on YTS and ET.

The Training Agency has a special needs training adviser working with Lead Industry Bodies to advise them where barriers to access occur. It has also initiated programmes of work designed to facilitate access by trainees to existing qualifications.

FEU

FEU is currently engaged on a project (RP495) which develops the work carried out for the project described in this bulletin. A major series of studies, *Working Together?*, contains valuable guidance for employers, education services and voluntary organisations in the report *Enabled to Work*, which examines the support needs of young people with disabilities and their employers during initial employment. FEU would expect any staff development activity relating to NVQs to include coverage of the needs and capacities of learners with disabilities and the approaches required to meet them.

CHANGING ROLE OF FE COLLEGES

Many colleges of FE have wide experience of providing learning opportunities for students with special needs which promote their independence and develop their basic skills. This experience is of continuing value in the context of changing external demands stemming from national and local policies and the continuing activity of NCVQ, the Training Agency and awarding bodies.

Further education should be proactive in creating opportunities for this group of learners to achieve nationally recognised vocational qualifications. It will need to deliver effectively designed individual programmes based on appropriate assessment, rather than traditional courses. Given the shift towards employment-led standards and training, tutors may find their role changing to one of assessor, designer and facilitator. The college may, for some students, become a simulated workplace.

The potential of people with disabilities to be active in the labour market is greater than is acknowledged. Colleges must foster close relationships with NCVQ, the Training Agency, Lead Industry Bodies and awarding bodies to ensure that the requirements of this group are fully taken into account in standards setting and assessment. Colleges must also forge closer links with industry in order to prepare their learners to meet employers' needs.

A corporate approach is imperative. Multi-agency involvement will lead to greater anticipation of problems and mutually agreed solutions. The first step must be for professionals working with learners with disabilities to shift their expectations of the sort of lives these people can have. Opportunities for the full adult status which employment most often confers are there, but only if professionals, learners and employers alike see employment as a realistic, achievable goal.

Enquiries about this work and other FEU initiatives relating to NVQs or special needs can be made through Pat Hood or Nick Brewster at FEU, 2 Orange Street, London WC2H 7WE (tel: 01-321 0433 ext. 269 or 272).

For further copies of this bulletin, copies of the full project report and details of other FEU publications, please contact the FEU Information Centre at the above address (ext. 256).

ISBN 1 85338 189 6
MARCH 1990